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A joyfully swinging tribute to Waller

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THOMAS (Fats) Waller was a great pianist and a composer of such enduring standards as Honeysuckle Rose and Ain't Misbehavin' as well as more obscure pieces such as Your Socks Don't Match.

They all have a common thread, though: great musicality.

CONCERT REVIEW

And a tight, swinging seven-piece band and two singers paid tribute to Waller's musical talents in two weekend concerts that highlighted the man's instrumental and lyrical work, both mainstream and obscure.

The concerts, Saturday afternoon and night, were a fitting end to the Izzy Asper Jazz Performances season with their mix of great vocals, instrumentals and arranging.

New York singers Catherine Russell and Allan Harris were a tag team on Waller's songs, sharing the spotlight, and duetting on the opening (This Joint is Jumpin') and closing (Ain't Misbehavin') numbers of the afternoon concert.

Catherine Russell and Allan Harris

- Asper Jazz Series
- Winnipeg Art Gallery, May 3
- 4 and a half stars out of 5

They are both excellent singers, suited to the Waller songbook, and were backed by tenor saxophonist, arranger and musical director of the show Andy Farber, bassist Steve Kirby, pianist Will Bonness, drummer Quincy Davis, alto saxophonist Jon Gordon, trumpeter Derrick Gardner and trombonist Brad Shigeta.

The four horns made a formidable front line while the rhythm section kept the music swinging, really swinging, through 18 tunes composed, arranged or performed by the acclaimed entertainer, who is credited with laying the groundwork for modern jazz piano.

As great as the full band was, a highlight of the concert was Russell singing Blue Turning Gray Over You with just the rhythm section of Kirby, Bonness and Davis.

Pianist Bonness shone on this tune, as he did on so many others throughout the concert, and Kirby, who swung like mad all afternoon, got the chance to dig deep in his solo spot.

Farber, who has presented a version of this show at New York's Lincoln Center, told anecdotes about Waller and his career throughout the show. For example, as well as being a prolific composer, Waller was a voracious eater and he agreed to compose a tune for the great bandleader Fletcher Henderson when Henderson covered Waller's bill for 14 hamburgers.

That composition, Henderson Stomp, was an instrumental showcase Saturday afternoon that allowed Bonness to show an appreciative audience how easily he can conjure the spirit of the great Harlem stride pianist. (At least it seemed easy from a seat in the theatre.)

The horn players were a tight ensemble throughout and great soloists who showcased Waller's instrumental writing and gave the singers a solid foundation for the vocal numbers.